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Standing Alone

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STANDING ALONE

The Goose Lady lived down the road and she was dying. No longer was her small acreage the scene for games and tricks when visitors came. Johan remembered those days, how at sunset he and his friends would walk down the road after he knew the Goose Lady was in her upstairs bedroom. How in unison they would scream from the ditch and watch the quick response from the house—her skinny face and neck appearing over the sill of the upstairs window at the same instant the heads and necks of a dozen geese appeared from the first-floor windows, all the heads coming up at once like two-story jacks-in-the-box. He remembered the lingering image of the geese heads bobbing as if they were set on springs, the Goose Lady peering from side to side, shaking her fist.

Things were different now. He had turned fourteen last spring and the Goose Lady was dying. No more tricks. His father had warned him, "The Goose Lady will not be around much longer." No doctors came to see her, but Johan didn't argue with his father: it was serious enough to hear the news, no sense talking about it. But when summer vacation came, he decided to watch death happen. See what it was. Find out why his father insisted that the Goose Lady not be bothered and why all the neighbors had begun to speak quietly of her, if at all. The new, strange respect.

Johan made his place in the ditch across from the Goose Lady's orchard. Wild barley, alfalfa, red clover, milkweeds. Smell of oats, sweet clover, wild roses, on the soft south wind coming in from the fields behind him. Meadowlark songs, meadowlarks answering each other across the fields. Small clouds of gnats hovering over the gravel road. And then, closer than he thought, the sounds of the Goose Lady's hands working. He leaned forward, looked through the blind of grass and honeysuckle. There she was—thirty feet away, bent over, teetering from the fulcrum of her hips, her knees unbent—a boomerang—hands busily sorting through the twigs, pebbles, leaves, on the orchard floor. Her long blue-gray skirt ruffling slightly in the breeze, her gray hair tied over her head, the green kerchief a tight band across her forehead and tied behind under the large bundle of

hair, the thin neck stretching down, the small, the very small, face close to the ground, the pursed lips, sharp nose, the small eyes in profile, glaring, the torso bobbing from the hips, the face almost pecking the ground, the fingers working methodically as if they were gathering a scattered string of precious beads from the earth.

Every day. As he had seen her before, as the whole neighborhood had seen her before, from morning until evening, from early spring until early winter. It was what the Goose Lady did. It was what she had always done, what everyone would have seen her doing now, if they had looked. The simple but frantic work of gathering anything the small fingers could hold from the orchard floor, carrying the debris in little bundles to the edge of the orchard, and dropping them over the fence into the ditch. It was not so scary to watch at this close range as Johan thought it would be. The world was singing around her, the smell of fallen cherry blossoms was still in the air, the clouds were slow, wide brush strokes, the sparrows ruffled and mated. From the distant fields, a soft muffled rattling of machinery. Pungent root and mulch smell near the ground. The steady dance of the hands. Death, where is your sting.

Until he no longer believed what his father said, returning after a week of clouds and rain, seeing more of the forceful earth life blossoming everywhere—the small acreage a silent symphony of verdant smells and colors, the earth rising under his knees where he hid. Small fruit hung on the trees, thick, bending the boughs toward the earth. Perhaps what the Goose Lady did was good for the soil. Her hands spoke to the roots. She was working steadily, between the trees, under them. And to his right, back farther from the road, the old house looked peaceful and good, the faded wood still dark from the rains, the ornate upstairs gables sharp and steeple-like against the still-clouded sky, and the geese waddling in a flock near the house, a slow, mannered, contentment, stark white in spite of the mud. He lifted the view into his mind like a picture, stood back, and saw that it was good. Looking again at the Goose Lady, he saw her hands were dark with wet earth. Her dress was green. Her kerchief was blue. Little showers of debris fell over the fence. Johan saw progress on the orchard floor: the earth was cleaner. His own legs grew numb beneath him. He touched them, found them senseless, but the trousers were wet, like the grass. He touched the grass, then his legs. It was as if he had become part of the earth. He waited for the tingling to start, the

ants inside his legs as the feeling returned, and he started crawling through the ditch toward his home, almost laughing at the strange sensation that followed him in his thighs.

That night he thought of Marie. A classmate. From the door on his father's milkbarn he could see the yardlight of the farm where she lived, a mile down the road past a neighbor's farm, past the Goose Lady's acreage. He wanted to tell her the Goose Lady was not dying. Marie liked important news. He wanted to tell her there would be cherries and apples to filch in a few months. Marie would have a plan. And he wanted to make a sack swing with a thirty foot rope tied to the extending barnpeak rafter and to give her a push on it. The summer was still young, everything was possible.

But when the hot weather came in July, he returned to that other dream, a mission he could not forget. And in the heat of that clear day he found the sudden change—the cherry and apple trees blighted at the top, the leaves curling and brown, an odor of goose dung thick in the air. The Goose Lady stood sixty yards away, her geese around her gagging and beating their wings, small goose feathers and down mushrooming around them. He remembered the voices of the oats-harvesting crew who had been working in his father's fields for the past several days. The repeated words of 'price' and 'yield,' the scorn for enemy 'corporation,' the smiles for friend 'progress.' The Goose Lady waved her arms like an old wooden windmill. She was not enough today, Johan knew—a painful realization. The geese were thinner than last month, standing around hungry and thirsty. She pumped water, she threw crumbs. Somewhere beyond them was a world Johan had only begun to know and one which the Goose Lady had never seen, where cattle came running not to the sound of a voice but the sound of the electric motor auguring feed through their trough. With his own eyes Johan had seen a sow on a cold night turn on the switch for the heat lamp with her snout. While the Goose Lady talked to the geese, speaking in the same voice as theirs. It squeaked, and they gagged. The hungry geese looked up and the empty hands waved. There was death here after all.

And after death, what then? Who would dare eat these apples? these plums? these cherries? And who would dare touch her, carry the body from the upstairs? Johan imagined that afterwards the house would be burned like the one-room school house when it closed. The house burned, the thin geese slaughtered, and the orchard leveled.

Next year the Goose Lady's home would be cornfields. How short, how untrue, last month's beauty had been.

A hand brushed Johan's sleeve. When he looked up, the same hand was brushing dark bangs from a lovely face. Marie. She sat on her knees beside him, staring at him.

"What are you doing?"

Marie had changed since he last saw her stepping off the bus. The eyes were larger than before and didn't flit shyly from side to side, the eyes were larger and more piercing, fixed and deep, looking directly into his. Johan felt a blush rise on his neck. He looked down, only to see Marie's breasts bulging under her blue work shirt, not tiny and pointed as they were last spring, but fuller, round breasts.

"I've been watching her." He nodded toward the Goose Lady. Marie looked.

"Why? Can't steal those apples yet—they're too little." Again her eyes met his directly.

"Because she's dying."

Marie looked. The Goose Lady had moved into the orchard. The geese were standing near the water troughs staring after her as if dumbfounded, betrayed. She bent over, began working, her fingers moving quickly as a pianist's.

"No she isn't," said Marie. "She's always like that."

"No, really. She's dying. You can see it."

"I don't believe it." She started chewing her gum, looking at Johan askance, as if she were questioning more than his credibility. He looked again at her, trying to see her whole body without moving his eyes, without letting her know that he was staring. The change scared him. The front shirt-tails of her blue work shirt were tied in front. Her jeans were tight and low, leaving a large span of tanned midriff between the jeans and shirt. The hands, the fingers, were longer and more slender. But mostly the face, the large eyes, and the cheeks which were no longer round and glowing but hollowed just below the cheek-bones.

"I thought I'd see more of you this summer," she said. "Why don't you ever come to the bridge? There's a nest of little swallows under the bridge. I've been watching *them* all summer. They're almost ready to fly."

"Well, I've been watching the Goose Lady." His voice was firm, he tried not to lose Marie, looking, focusing his attention once more on

the Goose Lady. "Death is terrible." Marie tensed and looked again at the old woman, then again at Johan. Her jaw froze. She believed. Speaking softly, as if she were rescuing him from the horror, she said, "Come with me."

Johan followed, crawling out of view and walking down the road to the bridge half way between their fathers' farms. They went under the bridge where only a small stream trickled through the wide creek bed. She showed him the bridge piling where the young swallows were nesting. Four of them, their eyes staring out over the edge of the nest. They looked like a covey of little men with black helmets. When he approached, the small pointed wings spread over the edge of the nest, a gesture that was almost flight. A full-grown swallow swept down from one side of the bridge, made one threatening weave in his direction, and continued on out the other side of the bridge and disappeared.

"That's the Mother," said Marie. "She knows I won't hurt them, but she doesn't trust you yet." She put a finger into Johan's ribs, emphasizing the *you*.

"I'm gonna eat 'um," said Johan, smirking.

"Big meany." She tickled him with five fingers. They laughed.

"Watch it. I'll throw you in the crick."

"Oh yeah?" She tickled him with both hands. Johan grabbed her shoulders, but she continued to tickle him. They squirmed, trying to get position on each other. When she stepped back to maintain her balance, one foot slipped into the creek. She started to fall, and pulled him with her. Together into the creek. A free-for-all of mud and water, splashing, constant giggling, and suddenly they were sitting across from each other in the shallow creek, Marie's blue work shirt unbuttoned and open with one breast fully exposed.

Johan felt the chill. It was as if he had broken a fragile and precious trust. "Marie, I'm sorry." She was leaning back with both hands wrist-deep in mud. The playful smile had turned into a tight grimace.

"You son of a bitch." It was almost a whisper but had the intensity of a low snarl from a trapped beast. She leaned to one side, trying to pull a hand free from the mud. The breast swayed. The anger grew. Then desperation. She lunged from side to side, her hands still stuck in the mud wrist-deep. Johan looked away.

"Don't be mad, Marie. Please don't be mad. I didn't mean it."

Marie was breathing long and deep, and then the crying began,

long agonized wailing. She hung her head down, trying to conceal the breast with her hair.

Johan looked in both directions. Nothing. Fields. Cows and fields. He turned towards her, stood over her. "Please, don't, Marie. Please don't cry." The muscles in his own throat released, and he was crying too. It was easier to move now: he stooped down and lifted her under her arms. The hands came free like little suction cups and she was standing, both breasts exposed now, wet, beautifully white. Her hands were covered with mud and she held them away from her body. He pulled her to him, held her tightly. They began to breathe more easily, evenly, interrupted only by an occasional quick hiccough.

"Don't tell anyone, Johan. Please don't tell."

He held her tighter. "I won't, Marie. I won't tell anybody."

"I feel so ashamed of myself."

"Marie, don't be ashamed to me. Don't ever be ashamed to me."

He released his arms and held her shoulders. He looked at her breasts. She watched his face. He touched a breast with his hand. He put a palm over it. He held it until his hand grew warm. They kissed. They looked into each other's eyes, and Johan felt something he had never felt before, in his chest, in his stomach. Everywhere.

Marie pulled back. "Johan?"

He looked around quickly.

"Look at us. We'd better get cleaned up."

They began the task together, standing beside each other in the creek, washing their hands and faces, rubbing dirt from each other's clothing with handkerchiefs.

"We could always tell our folks we were making mud pies together," said Johan. They laughed. Immediately, it was hysterical laughter. They embraced. They kissed again. Johan put his hands under Marie's shirt and held her breasts. He wanted to say "good growing season." He didn't.

"Do you think it's all right?" he asked. "I mean, do you think we can still be friends?"

Marie seemed to understand why he asked the question. "Let's come back here after supper and talk," she said.

"That's a good idea." He took her hand and kissed her forehead. Marie left from one side of the bridge, Johan from the other.

After a few steps he looked back, saw Marie walking lightly in the opposite direction, the sharp orbs of her buttocks firm under the

jeans, the long hair flowing behind her, her arms swinging freely. He thought of her crying, the helpless and awkward position, the shame written on her face. It hurt to think of it—that such beauty could be brought to such quick shame and humiliation, her lovely manner broken in one painful instant. Instead, he would remember this, what he saw now, and the laughter, the promises, the embrace.

Walking back past the Goose Lady's house, Johan stopped for a second time that afternoon to watch her. It was like walking back into a fire-parched forest after touching the first fruit of the first tree of Eden. He thought it would be different returning to the Goose Lady's place, that the sweetness of Marie would be here too, that it would be everywhere for the rest of his life. He sat down in what had become his regular hiding place, an oval of pressed grass, and did not look at the Goose Lady. He touched his face, he reached under his shirt, touched his nipples lightly and imagined the softness of Marie. He rubbed his nipples and it felt good. He rubbed his own thighs and imagined Marie. He put his moist sweating arm to his lips and kissed it lovingly. He lay rolled up, arms across his ribs, embracing himself. It was as if Marie were there with him, within him, inside him, her love in his lips kissing him as he kissed himself. He felt the young woman's desire in his breasts, a desire to please Johan with them, and to be given pleasure by Johan. He rubbed his breasts, her breasts, with both hands. He felt the pain in his thighs, Marie's thighs, opening for him, Marie for Johan, and the desire which was Johan's, which was Marie's.

Nearby, he heard a rustling, a scratching on the orchard floor. He looked, saw the nibbling frail hands of the Goose Lady, a few yards away, through the huckleberries. There was death in the dry wind, in the heat waves shimmering over the orchard, in the motionless forms of the geese near the house with their heads under their wings, in the house itself, its gray faded siding, the dirty scuff marks of the geese on the doors. Overhead, he heard a jagged caw—a blue jay in the top of a withering cherry tree pecking hard, all muscle, devouring, halving the cherries in one motion, and closer, a few feet from him, he saw only the small hands of the Goose Lady and the cuffs of a gray soiled dress through the thick bushes. It was as if these were all that were left of her body, hands that would forever roam the orchard, scratching, like self-propelled cultivator blades. On his arm he could feel his spittle drying, a reminder of Marie's love still close. At once there was the

sweetness of Marie and the cold presence of the Goose Lady all around him. Her hands, his hands, Marie's hands. Then it was only the Goose Lady. Two handfuls of garden debris spilled over the fence near his face, the small pieces of twigs, feathers, and leaves suspended in the tall grass like a shattered nest, and, just above the debris, the gray uncombed hair of the Goose Lady, and below the hair, through the small honeysuckle leaves, her shining piercing eyes looking directly into his.

The face was gentle, softness around the intense eyes. Her mouth opened in surprise shaping a small *o*, the voice emitted a small "oh." She turned, walked away. Johan stood up, without thinking shouted, "Goose Lady!" She stooped down where she had been working. "Goose Lady!" he yelled. He ran up the side of the ditch, through the honeysuckles, pulled himself over the fence. "Goose Lady!" He was in her orchard, his feet on the ground that she had been tidying for years. In the orchard that was dying, the orchard where she was dying. "Goose Lady!" He tapped her on the back. Surprised, she stood up. She couldn't hear me, he thought. She is deaf. Like her trees, she is dying at the top first. Johan felt that he was standing alone, though the Goose Lady was only a few feet from him, facing him, and she too seemed to be alone, her arms akimbo, her head cocked toward him as if she were trying to share just a bit of this voice from a different world. A strange, bewildered look on her face: as if she had never seen anyone standing in her orchard before. And then she spoke in a high, kind voice: "Hello, young man." She twisted her lips as she spoke, exposing her gums, an awkward movement, as if she were using a part of her body that did not often function.

There was a long pause. It felt warmer and quieter here among the dying trees, quieter and warmer than in the ditch. Death's odor was everywhere—in the strong smell of goose dung, in the rotting plums; everywhere there was the smell of an empty room that had been closed long to fresh air. Johan leaned close. "Do you like it here?"

"I do not hear well." She leaned towards him. From her mouth came the smell of wet wallpaper. Her face, now close, was dark complexioned with darker, almost wine-colored spots on it. Deeply wrinkled, not in straight lines but in strange patterns with oddly shaped triangular and rectangular islands of flesh within the boundaries of wrinkles. Bobby pins over her forehead angled up and under the blue kerchief. Everything about her face was small, closely

knit, yet ageless, polished, like granite. Even the wrinkles seemed sculpted. Except for the flesh around her eyes, the gray, piercing eyes. There were no eyelashes and the eyes met his from little chambers of soft flesh.

Johan pointed. "I live over there!"

The Goose Lady looked. Nodded. She held her hands folded on her stomach, politely. It all seemed all right to Johan—the Goose Lady, the fact that he had come here. Just another person who had things to do, that's what she was. Johan looked down and saw the orchard as she saw it. The infinite number of little pock marks her fingers had left on the soil, the little bits of leaves, the seeds, the small glittering grains of sand.

"Would you like some help?" he shouted.

The Goose Lady looked puzzled, as if she had not heard, or as if he had asked the important question.

"When you have been there three times, the trees will listen."

Johan looked at the trees. Their leaves were still. The rotting fruit was still. From the doorway of the house, the geese stood watching them, frozen in observation. Johan's shoulders tightened.

"In a good year," she continued, her small voice rising in pitch, "there will be seven or eight." She lifted a finger as if emphasizing a truth. The forefinger did not straighten—a small hook. Then she fidgeted nervously. She looked down, as if she were unsure of her statement. "Better fix things up. More every time. They'll get in the way of the best of them." She shook her head as if it were a pitiful shame. "You can't get rich that way." She shook her head again, more vigorously than before. "Sixty of them. And Herb got hailed out in the lower forty last year."

Johan stooped down and started picking up the smallest grains of sand he could see, picking them up under his fingernails. The Goose Lady stooped down too, began working beside him, very fast, as if demonstrating how it was done. He walked with her to the fence with his smaller handfuls. She threw hers over, he his. He pointed toward home. She smiled. He climbed the fence. She waved good bye, he waved.

Later, under the bridge, Johan sat alone waiting, wishing the moon were less bright, wondering what he would say to Marie. Crazy and deaf. The Goose Lady was crazy and deaf, what his father must have known. Or would Marie rather not hear? Above him the dark bulge

of the mother swallow, almost teetering on top of her young, the water trickling at his feet, the smell of dew on oats stubble in the air, the undulating and continuous sounds of the crickets. Then she was beside him, a smell of perfume, a very sweet perfume.

"Do your folks know you're out?"

"No," said Johan. "Do yours?"

"No."

They sat beside each other, not touching.

"It's kind of scary out here," said Johan. Marie turned towards him, laughed a short nervous laugh. There was sweetness on her breath too. Butterscotch.

"You're supposed to be a man."

They sat silently, looking at the water. Their tracks were still in the mud.

"I've been thinking about you," said Johan. "It's hard to talk after you've been thinking about somebody. It's so easy when you're thinking about somebody."

"Do you want me to go away so you can think about me?"

"Oh, no. No, don't go away. Let's talk."

"Okay."

They sat quietly again. The creek trickled by.

"I milked all the cows alone tonight," said Johan.

"How many?"

"Nine."

"I gathered all the eggs," said Marie.

"Ever wish you lived in town?"

"Sometimes."

They sat, motionless. The water said 'galloup.'

"What was that?"

"Just a clod falling off the bank, scaredie-cat," said Marie.

They looked upstream. The water kept coming.

"Sometimes I wish I did. Not now."

"Not now what?" said Johan.

"Sometimes I wish I lived in town, but not now."

"Why not?"

"Because then I wouldn't be here talking with you."

"Oh." Johan shifted his weight, nearly facing her. "I wouldn't want to live in town either. I like being here with you. Town kids don't have anywhere to go and talk."

She breathed in his face again. She was all sweetness. She had changed her shirt since earlier in the day. It was a blouse now, a light pink blouse. A shiny material, like silk. And she had on a skirt, naked knees just a few inches from his. Her shoes were different too—white tennies. Johan wanted to touch her. He couldn't. She must have thought about everything that happened. Now she would say, "No, don't. Not this again." It would be terrible. He would walk away embarrassed and never be able to talk to her again.

"Let's go for a walk," said Marie.

"Okay."

They started walking along the creek, into a pasture. Holstein cows lay like large rocks in the distance. The moon was still bright, but a mist was starting to rise from the creek. Their shoulders touched as they walked, and she took his hand. Immediately, they turned and walked back to the bridge. They sat again, holding hands.

A car approached on the gravel road. "Listen!" They sat, frozen. The rumble like logs rolling overhead. They looked up. It continued on, sand clicking under its fenders. They sighed.

"Look—the swallows didn't even scare," said Marie.

"Of course not. I ate 'um."

"Johan!" Marie shrieked, laughing. "You big meany!" She tickled him. He giggled helplessly, grabbing at her, pulling her to him. She threw her arms around him.

"Not the crick, Johan!"

"No, not the crick."

"I have a blanket right out there," Marie said, pointing.

"What? How did you get it out of the house?"

"It's okay." She ran to get it. They each held two corners and spread it on the dry dirt beside the creek.

"This is nice," said Johan, rubbing the blanket with his hands.

"Yeah, it's a quilt my grandmother made."

"Oh," Johan sighed, lying down and stretching his arms out.

"Hmm, that looks good." Marie lay down beside him, her head resting on his shoulder.

The mist billowed from the creek. It was as if the earth were breathing, its visible white breath becoming a cloud into which they floated. The creek flowed by, its sound next to them. Until its sound was in the center of their heads, its direction unclear, and their hands moved without plan, without forethought, discovering, the mind no

more than a question, imagining what was under the moist clothing, the clothing loosening, the cool flesh on flesh, the flesh warming to the touch of another's, the edges of all things blurring, neither knowing where the earth began under them, nor the mist around them.

And that other presence hovering for a moment in the mist, disappearing, then reappearing as if the moon had found its way into the mist and lit for a moment the small human figure which stepped toward them, stopped, and stepped back into the dense cloud.

"Marie . . ." a hoarse whisper. "Look."

They stared, seeing the same figure, stationary, then moving, the color of the earth, a rock in the mist, a faint shuffling sound.

"Get your clothes! Get them! She can't hear us!"

"Is it the Goose Lady?"

"Yes! Yes! She's crazy!"

It was everyone for himself, Johan scrambling for his clothing, Marie for hers, Marie rolling the quilt on her arm, each scrambling up the bank to the road, saying nothing, asking nothing, running from each other, towards their homes. Johan watched the ditches for the Goose Lady, glanced up at her bedroom window as he ran past her acreage, imagining that somehow she had gotten home before him.

Later, he did not know how much later, though he had not slept, Johan heard sirens, heard his parents downstairs scrambling from bed, got up himself, slipped on his clothing which were still moist beside the bed. And through his bedroom window he saw the flames.

The flashing lights of the fire trucks, the headlights of scores of cars following, yardlights on farms across the flat lands blinking on, the whole neighborhood awakening, responding to the night excitement. The event! The event! The flames like a beacon. Hearts leaping everywhere.

The building was a hog barn on a neighbor's farm, adjacent to the Goose Lady's acreage, set far back from the road. Johan heard his parents leave by car. He followed, running. The fire had eaten a hole through the roof and the flames shot up into the night sky like a torch, not eating now from the the edges of the gaping hole but feeding on the straw in the mow. The fire was the sound of a rushing wind, but as Johan came closer he heard shouts of firemen and farmers and the din of trapped animals squealing, a sustained and horrible scream that was almost human.

Cars were parked on the roadway, on the neighbor's lawn. Cars with loud mufflers came skidding to a stop on the gravel road. Men, women, children, some half dressed, tying their shirts as they came. Teen-age boys, old men carrying small fire extinguishers. All their faces were excited, joyous, as if they had come to a celebration. Until they were close enough to hear the animals. Some turned immediately and left, not wanting to see the outcome.

The attention of the firemen focused on the animals, the unison sounds of bedlam, punctuated now and then by a suddenly higher squeal that rose over the others as one was trampled or caught directly in the flames. Finally, a plan was put into action. Two firemen ran toward the building with axes, their bodies engulfed in a misting blast of water. They swung madly at the siding of the building at a corner where the animals seemed to be huddled. They ran back for air and relief from the heat, then ran in again, swinging. The wood split, a hole, a pig snout, and the animals came streaming out. Some fell and died as they reached freedom. All were dark with smoke and scorch marks. Firemen turned the water on them as they emerged. Their flesh sizzled when the water touched it. The air filled with the stench of burning flesh, a horrible pungent smell that clung like tear gas in their nasal cavities. A woman braced herself against a car and vomited on the ground. Everyone held his nose. Gaggling passed through the crowd. Then a large pig emerged totally covered with fire, squealing, spinning like a rodeo bronco, then running headlong and blindly into the crowd. Firemen tried to follow the animal with hoses, lost it in the crowd—the crowd scrambling, leaping on cars, screaming in fear of the maniacal torch of flesh that seemed to pursue each of them. Men beat at it with their jackets as it passed. There was a shotgun blast, another, and the animal lay dead between the cars. The old men were there with their fire extinguishers putting out the corpse.

Johan stumbled onto the road, his hand over his nose. He started toward home, but Marie's voice stopped him. "Johan!" She was dressed in her skirt and blouse, horror in her eyes. They met, speechless for a moment, and walked away from the flames.

"Johan, I'm so scared, I'm so scared."

"It's all over."

"What, Johan? What's all over?"

"Everything that was happening. Everything."

They stood tense, questions swarming in their minds, questions like flames that burned without consuming, that began nowhere and reached nowhere, questions that hovered like the beginning of eternal torment, flames falling down around them. Throats aching with nothing to say, they stood next to each other, staring down.

"She's crazy." Johan's voice cracked.

"You don't think—"

"I don't know. I don't even know if we saw her by the bridge. It was misty. It's all crazy."

"I've never been so scared."

"She's so crazy, maybe she started the fire. Maybe she's still in it."

"No, don't. We don't know. Maybe an electric short. Or combustion of new hay. That happens. And maybe we didn't see her."

Johan breathed heavily, fighting his sobs. Marie responded with new strength. "She can't be that crazy. And why would she want to do that to us? It's not our barn. And we didn't do anything anyhow."

"I don't want to do anything again." He began sobbing. His voice was tight, broken, his throat muscles sore from having cried earlier that day. "I'm not going to do—to do anything again. Everything's terrible. Everything's dying. Did you see those pigs? They were burning alive. Stupid pigs sleeping in their own shit and all of a sudden they wake up burning to death. What if that had been a house? We could have burned to death. Maybe she's burning everything down. Kill everything before she dies. Get everybody else first."

"Don't, Johan. Don't. We don't know."

They both saw it—movement in the Goose Lady's orchard, a sweeping movement like a curtain, then clearer—the long skirt ruffling beneath the trees, and the whole figure emerged, standing, staring in the direction of the fire.

"Johan, Let's run!"

"No. No." He took her hand, tugged toward the Goose Lady.

"No. Please. I can't go near her."

"We've got to." His voice was strong again. "We've got to talk to her. We've got to know." He started toward her. Numb, Marie followed. They walked toward her where she stood alone and motionless near the fence. But suddenly she knelt down on all fours and disappeared in the dark shadows near the fence, and what rose all around her like white skeletal arms were the sleek necks of the geese,

dozens of necks close around her, their napes reflecting in the light of the fire like fists. Johan and Marie stopped, for they knew that if they had gone closer the geese would have attacked. The head of the Goose Lady rose to the level of the geese. She stared at them. Johan reached for Marie's hand, felt his fear pass into her. The fire behind them was like hideous laughter. Before them the geese necks were steel and savage instruments of death, the Goose Lady herself but one of many demons. They let go of each other's hands, started walking away from the Goose Lady, away from the fire, away from each other.